



# Amnesty International

## Group 524

## August 2018



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**Next Meeting: Tuesday, August 21 – 7:00 p.m. – Providence Heights**

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### Focus on Saudi Arabia

At the end of July, two more prominent human rights activists were arrested in Saudi Arabia. In recent years, the two women – **Samar Badawi** and **Nassima al-Sada** – have been repeatedly targeted, harassed, and placed under travel bans for their human rights activism. **Raif Badawi**, a prisoner of conscience whose case we have worked on for several years, is Samar's brother.

Robin Wright, a Middle East expert who writes for [The New Yorker](#), posted an article last week which describes the protest by Canada against the imprisonment, the aggressive reaction by the Saudis, and the situation in Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Wright describes him as “the youthful and increasingly autocratic leader, who has been enthusiastically embraced by President Trump and has been consolidating power since his surprise appointment, a year ago.” The article begins on Page 3.

Accompanying the article, we have a model letter to the Saudi ambassador in Washington, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Samar and Raif Badawi.

### Pope Francis: Death Penalty is Unacceptable in All Cases

The Vatican made this announcement on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. Writing in [The Atlantic](#), Emma Green provided a secular perspective on this important development for human rights. See Page 7.

### August 21<sup>st</sup> at Providence Heights

In addition to the brief item about **Thich Quang Do** and Vietnam in this issue (see Page 2), we'll have more on that country at the August 21<sup>st</sup> meeting.

Also on the agenda is a report from Amnesty about recent attempts to undermine the operations of the organization, by means of malicious spyware. To date, Amnesty has not yet determined which hostile government carried out the attack.

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Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.  
Meeting Location: Providence Heights  
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Warren ([jf.warren@verizon.net](mailto:jf.warren@verizon.net) or 412-766-2506) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA website ([www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org)) or the website of Amnesty International Group 39 ([amnestypgh.org](http://amnestypgh.org)).

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## **Washington: Commission Report Targets Religious Freedom Abuses in Vietnam**

In late April, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released its 2018 Annual Report. The report identifies 16 “Tier 1” countries which “engage in or tolerate systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.” The list includes Burma, China, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The report names 12 “Tier 2” countries which meet some, but not all, of the criteria for “Tier 1” (systematic/ongoing/egregious): Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey.

Also named as violators of religious freedom are three non-state entities: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria; the Taliban in Afghanistan; and al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Here are links to the USCIRF press release, and to the full 228-page report.

<http://www.uscirtf.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscirtf-releases-2018-annual-report-recommends-16-countries-be>  
<http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf>

The section on Vietnam begins on Page 122. Beginning on Page 214, there is an appendix which describes seven prisoner cases, including **Raif Badawi** and **Thich Quang Do**. Also included is **Pastor Andrew Brunson**, who continues to be held in a Turkish prison.

## **Massachusetts: Donation in Memory of Al Jacobson**

*Our June issue carried news of the death from cancer of our friend and colleague, Al Jacobson, of Group 56 in Lexington, MA. In his memory, we sent a donation to Communities Without Borders, the organization identified in his obituary. The acknowledgment letter from CWB included this text about the work they do.*

This donation will fund the Al Jacobson CWB Traveling Fellows program, established at First Parish Lexington to enable service volunteers to travel to Zambia to work on our AIDS orphans and vulnerable children education projects.

In addition to supporting school children, Communities Without Borders has been able to sponsor other related education programs:

- Training of pre-school teachers in family support homes
- Tutoring programs for exam preparation
- School-based health screenings
- Income-generating projects for the children’s caretakers

Access to school and other support programs allows children who otherwise would be condemned to a life of poverty, an avenue of hope for the future. On behalf of the Board of Directors and the students and teachers in Zambia, thank you for making this work possible.

## **Saudi Arabia: Prominent Human Rights Activists Imprisoned**

*As explained on Page 1, our focus this month is on Saudi Arabia, where two prominent human rights activists – **Samar Badawi** and **Nassima al-Sada** – were recently arrested. Samar is the sister of **Raif Badawi**.*

*This August 8<sup>th</sup> article by Robin Wright of The New Yorker places the persecution of the human rights activists in the context of the changing situation in Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Her starting point is his very aggressive reaction to the criticism by Canada of the imprisonment. As she notes, there is no reason to believe that Donald Trump would criticize Saudi human rights violations. An elaborate spectacle during Trump’s visit last year cemented his relationship with the Saudi leader. Another factor may be Saudi cash, as described in this article:*

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/at-president-trumps-hotel-in-new-york-revenue-went-up-this-spring-thanks-to-a-visit-from-big-spending-saudis/2018/08/03/58755392-9112-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.26b43eaa0733](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/at-president-trumps-hotel-in-new-york-revenue-went-up-this-spring-thanks-to-a-visit-from-big-spending-saudis/2018/08/03/58755392-9112-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.26b43eaa0733)

## **Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Picks a Very Strange Fight with Canada**

By social-media standards these days, a tweet sent last Thursday by Canada’s Foreign Minister, Chrystia Freeland, was hardly surprising—or a deviation from what other Western governments have said for years about Saudi Arabia’s egregious human-rights record. Her tweet addressed the case of siblings—Samar Badawi, a women’s-rights activist honored by the Obama Administration as a “woman of courage,” and her brother, Raif, a blogger imprisoned since 2012, after chastising the Saudi monarchy for things like banning Valentine’s Day.

Freeland tweeted, “Very alarmed to learn that Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi’s sister, has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time, and we continue to strongly call for the release of both Raif and Samar Badawi.” The Canadian Foreign Ministry followed up with a tweet that called for the release of “all peaceful human rights activists” held by the Gulf monarchy. The Canadian Embassy in Riyadh then tweeted the message in Arabic.

The desert kingdom erupted in fury. Over the weekend, it expelled the Canadian Ambassador, recalled its own envoy, froze all new trade and investment, suspended flights by the state airline to Toronto, and ordered thousands of Saudi students to leave Canada and get their education in other countries. Its Foreign Ministry counter-tweeted, “The Canadian position is an overt and blatant interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and is in contravention of the most basic international norms and all the charters governing relations between States.” Further, it issued a warning: “Any further step from the Canadian side in that direction will be considered as acknowledgment of our right to interfere in the Canadian domestic affairs.”

Canada stood its ground. “Let me be very clear, Canada will always stand up for human rights in Canada and around the world,” Freeland said, in Vancouver, on Monday.

The flap underscores the volatility—and potentially even the fragility—of the Saudi government under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the youthful and increasingly autocratic leader, who has been enthusiastically embraced by President Trump and has been consolidating power since his surprise appointment, a year ago.

## Saudi Arabia: Prominent Human Rights Activists Imprisoned (continued)



JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman meets with U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House on March 20.

At thirty-two, he is one of the youngest leaders in the Middle East. His ailing father, King Salman, has the final word, but bin Salman rules political, economic, military, and diplomatic affairs day to day. M.B.S., as he's widely known, has been increasingly intolerant of criticism at home and—now—from major foreign powers, according to Bruce Riedel, a former C.I.A., Pentagon, and National Security Council staffer, who is now at the Brookings Institution. “He is very thin-skinned,” Riedel told me.

President Trump's support, and a personal connection to Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, may have caused M.B.S. to feel that he has impunity to do as he pleases on the global stage. Trump's first stop on his inaugural foreign trip as President was in Saudi Arabia, a visit orchestrated—with much fanfare—by the crown prince. Unlike the government in Canada, the Trump Administration has shied away from invoking human-rights issues with the Saudis, despite a graphic State Department report, released in April, detailing the sweeping scope of violations in the kingdom.

The section on Saudi Arabia in the State Department's 2017 Human Rights Report runs long—more than fifty pages. It cites the most significant abuses as torture; arbitrary arrest; unlawful killings; execution without requisite due process; restrictions on freedom of expression, religion, and peaceful assembly; trafficking in persons; violence and discrimination against women; criminalization of same-sex sexual activity; and the inability of its people to choose a government through free and fair elections.

### **Saudi Arabia: Prominent Human Rights Activists Imprisoned (continued)**

Jamal Khashoggi, a former Saudi editor, now in exile in Washington, said that the crown prince has already become more authoritarian than any of the previous six kings who have ruled since 1953, when Ibn Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, died. “Today, he is in charge of Saudi Arabia. He thinks everyone should treat him as such,” Khashoggi told me.

During the past year, M.B.S. has run an intensive charm offensive in the United States and Europe—courting political leaders, tech titans, celebrities, society names, and academics. At the same time, the crown prince is behind the most aggressive foreign policy since Ibn Saud conquered rival tribes on the Arabian Peninsula to create the current kingdom. The gambits in international affairs by M.B.S., who is the first member of the royal family’s third generation to be chosen as heir, have been widely criticized.

“The Canadian campaign is the latest in a series of disastrous foreign-policy initiatives from M.B.S.,” Riedel told me. In 2015, in the role of Saudi Defense Minister, the crown prince launched a costly military intervention in Yemen, in turn producing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Twenty-two million Yemenis—eighty per cent of the population—now depend on humanitarian aid for daily survival. Sixteen million people lack access to fresh water. Eight million are believed to be on the brink of starvation. Yemen is also suffering the largest outbreak of cholera in recent history—more than a million cases.

In 2017, M.B.S. masterminded the air, sea, and land blockade of Qatar, a small neighboring sheikdom, which the crown prince reportedly wanted to invade. A few months later, M.B.S. summoned Lebanon’s Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, and pressured him to resign—on Saudi TV.

“They are all hasty and uncalculated decisions,” Khashoggi told me. “The crown prince is a poor decision-maker with a track record of incompetence,” Riedel said.

M.B.S. is also daring to confront Western nations, including countries important to Saudi security and economic development. In 2015, the year his ailing father ascended the throne, Saudi Arabia recalled its Ambassador to Sweden—also in a dispute about the case of the human-rights activist Raif Badawi. The young blogger had been sentenced to ten years in prison, a thousand lashes, and a fine of more than a quarter million dollars for mocking the kingdom’s rigid social restrictions on his Saudi Liberal Network Web site. Saudi officials charged the father of three with undermining national security. The lashes were supposed to be spread out—fifty per week for twenty weeks—though they were suspended after the first round. Sweden’s Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström, called the sentence “medieval” and suggested that the Royal House of Saud was a dictatorship.

Tensions deepened with Germany, too, in November, after Sigmar Gabriel, then the Foreign Minister, criticized “adventurism” in the Middle East in remarks that the kingdom took as a reference to its intervention in Yemen and as a suggestion that the Lebanese Prime Minister was being held in Saudi Arabia against his will. In January, Germany suspended arms exports to the Saudis, citing the war in Yemen. In May, M.B.S. decreed that no more government contracts were to be awarded to German companies, Der Spiegel reported.

### **Saudi Arabia: Prominent Human Rights Activists Imprisoned (continued)**

The same impulsive anger triggered the response to the initial Canadian tweet—and translation into Arabic—of the Foreign Minister’s message, Khashoggi said. “It is the pattern of behavior that has been dictating Saudi foreign policy since M.B.S. came to power,” he said. “It was taken as an offense on M.B.S.’s own turf. He saw it as an insult to his ability to control the Saudi masses.”

M.B.S.’s motive may also be part of a strategy to challenge nations that advocate a U.N.-led inquiry into Saudi abuses in Yemen, including air strikes that killed civilians. “Timing of Saudi crown prince’s lashing out at Canada for protesting his repression suggests his real aim is to dissuade governments next month from continuing the UN investigation of Saudi-led war crimes in Yemen,” Ken Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, tweeted on Tuesday. “Time to redouble support for the UN probe.” The U.N. General Assembly, attended by dozens of heads of state, opens next month in New York.

The crown prince’s actions belie the image he is trying to create. He has grandiose plans for diversifying the kingdom economically, beyond the oil industry, but since last fall the government has arrested dozens of leading business figures. He has talked about “moderate Islam” even as some moderate clerics have been detained. And, as he opened the way, this month, for women to be allowed to drive, his government arrested several women’s-rights activists, including the lawyer Samar Badawi [pictured below]. She has challenged cultural restrictions, including rules that require women to get a male guardian’s permission to get advanced education, a job, or a passport to travel abroad.



Unlike Trump, Canadian leaders have consistently supported the Badawi family. In 2013, a year after Raif Badawi’s arrest, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, of the Conservative Party, granted Badawi’s wife and children political asylum in Canada. This summer, under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, of the Liberal Party, Canada granted them citizenship.

After Canada called for the release Saudi Arabia’s peaceful activists, Marie-Pier Baril, a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry, vowed, “Our government will never hesitate to promote these values.”



## **Saudi Arabia: Model Letter to Saudi Ambassador in Washington**

*At the AIUSA website, there wasn't an action concerning Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sada, so this model letter was assembled from fragments of the Raif Badawi letter, and a press release (8/1/2018) found at the main Amnesty website:*

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/saudi-arabia-two-more-women-human-rights-activists-arrested-in-unrelenting-crackdown/>

Ambassador Khalid bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud  
Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia  
601 New Hampshire Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Your Excellency:

I am concerned about the imprisonment of Raif Badawi, Samar Badawi, and Nassima al-Sada. I believe that each of these individuals is a prisoner of conscience, held solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Each one should be released from prison, immediately and unconditionally.

Raif Badawi has been detained since June 2012, while Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sada were arrested in July 2018. They are three of the many activists in Saudi Arabia who have been persecuted for the “crime” of openly expressing their views. Your government must stop arresting, charging, prosecuting, and sentencing your citizens for simply exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

## **Vatican City: Death Penalty Declared Unacceptable in All Cases**

*This article by Emma Green was posted on the website of The Atlantic on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. It offers a secular perspective on this important development for human rights.*

## **The Pope's Groundbreaking Rejection of the Death Penalty**

Pope Francis has approved a change to the official teachings of the Catholic Church, calling for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty. The pope has frequently spoken out against the death penalty; in a speech in Rome last year, for example, Francis called the punishment “inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.”

The new change to the Catechism, which is the official body of the Church's teachings, formalizes that opposition based on “an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost, even after the commission of very serious crimes.”

In approving this change, Francis has sent a signal about his priorities—and his posture toward change. The Church has underscored its opposition to the destruction of any kind of life, even when that means defying the state. And Francis is willing to alter Church teaching to make that clear.

The Church has not always been a clear opponent of the death penalty. As Francis pointed out in his 2017 address, past popes presided over executions when they governed the Papal States, the territory in present-day Italy that was controlled by the Church until the late-19th century.



### **Vatican City: Death Penalty Declared Unacceptable in All Cases (continued)**

Francis rebuked his predecessors: “Let us take responsibility for the past and recognize that the imposition of the death penalty was dictated by a mentality more legalistic than Christian.”

In recent years, however, the Church has been steadily moving toward a rejection of the practice. In 1995, Pope John Paul II welcomed efforts to oppose the death penalty in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, affirming that “modern society in fact has the means of effectively suppressing crime . . . without definitively denying [criminals] the chance to reform.” Some local groups of bishops have prioritized this issue: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, has frequently urged legislatures and governors to reject the procedure and put this issue at the center of its advocacy efforts.

But the Church never quite declared its full opposition to the death penalty. John Paul II wrote that cases in which the death penalty is an “absolute necessity” are “very rare, if not practically non-existent,” but allowed for those exceptions. Until this week, the Catechism had taught that “traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty” if it’s the only way to protect human lives.

Now Francis has moved to make the Church’s position on the death penalty absolute. “The death penalty is an inhumane measure that, regardless of how it is carried out, abases human dignity,” he said last fall. He called for an official change to the Catechism, which was formalized this week.

For all of Francis’s moral resolution, changing Church teachings is a big step, and can be controversial. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican body that oversees Church teachings, justified the update based on “new” context: “increasing awareness” of the dignity of human beings, a “new understanding” of the consequences of state punishment, and the development of “more effective systems of detention” that still allow for the “possibility of redemption.” Because of this, the Church has concluded that the death penalty is “inadmissible.” The Church’s new position doesn’t actually contradict past teachings, they claimed; the context is what has changed.

In general, this posture toward change has been one of Francis’s legacies: He believes Church teachings should be updated to reflect contemporary moral understandings. As he said in his 2017 address on the death penalty, “The word of God cannot be mothballed like some old blanket in an attempt to keep insects at bay!”

This is a controversial position within an institution that has often declared itself a bulwark against the moral relativism of modern times. Even when Francis has clearly desired to change Church teachings on various subjects, he has framed these changes as continuous with past teachings, and has had to navigate dramatic internal Church politics along the way.

The new Catholic teaching on the death penalty underscores the Church’s commitment to the preservation of life. But it’s also a case study in how the Church can choose to change to meet the moral demands of modern times.